

Review of
National Geographic's World History California Textbook
Drafts

Hindu Education Foundation USA (HEF)

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This is a review of National Geographic's World History California Textbook which is one of the programs being considered for adoption for teaching in California public schools.

The textbook drafts being considered have several instances of adverse reflections on Hinduism and India in the textbook which violate the Californian Law and Educational standards. We see that the narrative in textbook draft reflects many Orientalist biases.

It is important to note that the Evaluation criteria for Instructional Material require the textbooks "to project the cultural diversity of society; instill in each child a sense of pride in his or her heritage; develop a feeling of self-worth related to equality of opportunity; eradicate the roots of prejudice; and thereby encourage the optimal individual development of each student". They also prohibit any "descriptions, depictions, labels, or rejoinders that tend to demean, stereotype, or patronize minority groups."¹ Our review shows that the drafts do not completely adhere to these provisions.

The National Geographic textbook offers several instances of Orientalism spread all over the draft - in images, in vocabulary, and in activities they have for the students.

¹*Education Code* Sections 51501, 60040(b), and 60044(a). Also see 'Standards for Evaluating Instructional Materials for Social Content, 2013 Edition', page 5 and page 9 of 19.

1. Orientalism - A Brief

By Orientalism, scholars refer to patronizing depictions of cultures and people that were part of an imagined geographical entity called the 'Orient' an area including India, China the Middle East and the South East Asia. Dr. Edward Said, a founder of the academic field of postcolonial studies, defines Orientalism as "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and (most of the time) "the Occident."" It is based on an underlying assumption that there is an "absolute and systematic difference between the West, which is rational, developed, humane, superior, and the Orient, which is aberrant, undeveloped, inferior."²

Said writes that since antiquity, the 'Orient' has had a special place in European Western experience, as a place of "romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes". Orientalism started off as "a way of coming to terms" with these strange and mysterious people. With many European nations becoming colonisers of these places, asymmetric power equations ensured that this way of understanding the colonized and their cultures, became the only legitimate way of understanding and creating knowledge about these people. As Said points out, Orientalist biases are not just manifested in many genuine works of Western scholarship but that "racial ideas too came from the same impulse." Needless to say, that the narratives based on them are often at variance with what the people of those cultures experience about themselves and also with empirical evidence.

Orientalists often see India as defined by primitive hierarchical structures of "caste" and outdated rituals. They conflate and essentialize Hinduism and Indian civilization into these structures and objectify Hindus ignoring their diversity, aspects of culture such as philosophy, aesthetics and art as also other achievements of the civilization.

Politically, colonialism might have ended in the last century, but many scholars have shown that its remnants are well entrenched in many different ways and that Orientalist biases still exist in the narratives about many of these cultures although they may not be ubiquitous at all times.

² Said, Edward W. 1978. *Orientalism*. New York: Pantheon Books

2. Erasing Hindu cultural practices from Harappan civilization

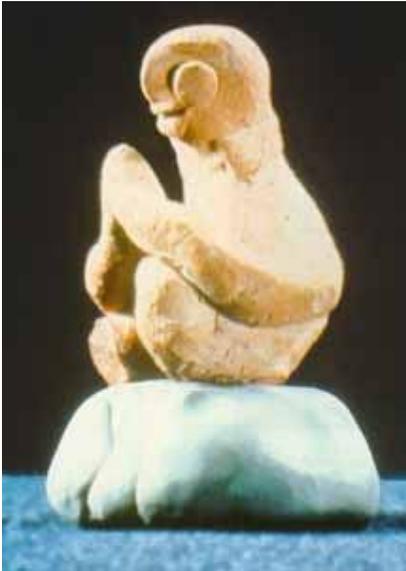
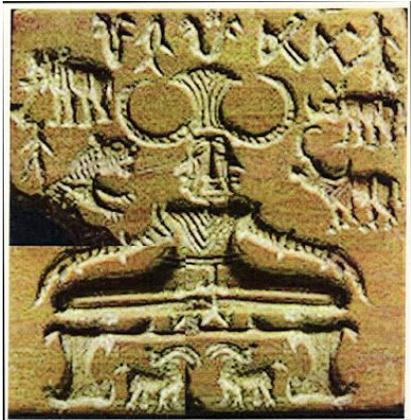
The textbook contends that “Historians know little about Harappan religion. Infact, much about the Harappans remains a mystery.” (Chapter 6, page 148)

This is not accurate. Archeologists have found wealth of information through excavations of hundreds of sites across the North and the North West India. Historians have uncovered many seals and artifacts that show cultural continuity between the ancient civilization and modern day Hindu practices. Please see the pioneering work of doyen of Indian archaeology Dr. B B Lal³.

2016 History Social Science Framework mentions many examples of Hindu cultural continuity found in Harappan excavations. Please refer to 2016 History Social Science Framework, see Framework chapter 10, lines 823 to 841 which clearly mention two instances namely, terracotta dolls in ‘Namaste’ greeting, seals that resemble the Hindu God Shiva in meditative pose as examples of common customs that resemble modern day Hinduism. These are completely ignored in the drafts so as not to even have a mention of them. These are completely contrary to the wealth of archaeological evidence which clearly indicates a cultural continuity.

This violates category 1.2, 1.4 and 1.6 of Evaluation Criteria Map laid down by CDE for adoption. Further such erasure of a heritage is contrary to the purposes laid out by the Standards for Evaluation of Instructional Material (2013) for instructional material.

³ B. B. Lal (2009). How Deep Are the Roots of Indian Civilization?: Archaeology Answers. Aryan Books. (B. B. Lal, is a renowned Indian archaeologist. He was the Director General of the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) from 1968 to 1972, and has served as Director of the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies, Simla. He also worked for UNESCO committees.)

Not in the textbook drafts		
		
<p>A terracotta doll excavated from Harappan civilization with 'Namaste' greeting.</p>	<p>A doll with vermillion on the parting of hair on forehead, a custom practiced by Hindu women even today</p>	<p>Pashupati seal - resembling Hindu God Shiva in meditating pose.</p>

3. Does Hinduism have philosophy, teachings and practices?

If it does, very little or nothing of it is mentioned in this textbook draft. It barely has a sentence on the concept of karma and yoga while not mentioning meditation or any description on other yogas. It does not even have a mention of purusharthas namely Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha all of which are mentioned in History Social Science Framework⁴.

This lack of coverage of philosophy and teachings of Hinduism makes anyone who reads the textbook feel that while all the other religions are based on well developed philosophy and practices, Hinduism is based on some primitive and often unjust practices and nothing at all that is of relevance today, fitting very well into the narrative of 'Oriental backwardness'. This clearly constitutes adverse reflection of Hinduism.

⁴ See Framework chapter 10, Sections The Early Civilizations of India, lines 881 to 884, lines 889 to 892

4. Simplistic and Inaccurate Depiction of Indian Social Structure

Consider the following paragraph from National Geographic's 'Ancient India' Section on Page 148 and Page 149

“Overtime, a social class system developed that determined how people lived. Priests were at the top, followed by warriors and nobles. Freeman, farmers, and traders were third in importance. At the bottom were slaves, laborers, and artisans. Non-Aryans made up most of the lowest class. Many centuries later, another group developed that was considered even lower.”

“The Aryan hierarchy developed into a rigid caste system that was hereditary and could never be changed. People’s castes dictated the kind of work they did and whom they could marry. The caste system even dictated what people could eat. Such definitions applied to people’s children as well.”

This narrative on how Indian social structure developed is completely inaccurate. It is both simplistic and anachronistic. Simplistic because it perpetuates the outdated Orientalist view of Indian social structure that reduces multiple social identities into a unidimensional “caste system.” It is anachronistic because it imports a later day phenomena of birth based “caste system” into Vedic times. There is no evidence to suggest that it was pervasive or even prevalent during the Vedic period. In fact many early Vedic hymns clearly show that the social structure during the Vedic period was fluid and not as rigid as is made out to be. Consider for example the following verses from the Rig Veda.

I am a reciter of hymns, my father is a doctor, my mother a grinder of corn. We desire to obtain wealth in various actions.

Rigveda 9.112.3

O Indra, fond of Soma, would you make me the protector of people, or would you make me a ruler, or would you make me a Sage who has consumed Soma, or would you bestow infinite wealth to me?

Rigveda 3.44.5

Historians believe that, the rigid birth based occupational social system that the paragraphs allude to, came about when the ‘varnas’ merged with the ‘jatis’ in a later period of time. When did this merging of diverse social organizations occur?

Recent genetic studies⁵ have suggested that the birth based occupational social system what has been called 'caste' in modern lexicon, started setting in only about 70 generations ago suggesting that it could be around 5th century CE or later that such a system started setting in. Yet, it did not become pervasive encompassing the whole of the Indian society till the onset of colonialism. Studies have indicated that Indian society even during medieval times was a lot more heterogenous before it was simplified, reduced and transformed during colonial rule into the colonially constructed concept of 'Caste System.'

Nicholas Dirks, the former Chancellor of the University of California, Berkeley and one of the foremost scholars on colonialism in India writes in 'Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India' that "caste", as we know it today, as a basic expression or essence of Indian tradition and as a designation that exhausted the totality of Indian social forms is "the product of a concrete historical encounter between India and Western colonial rule."⁶

Dirks writes

"In precolonial India, the units of social identity had been multiple, and their respective relations and trajectories were part of a complex, conjunctural, constantly changing, political world. The referents of social identity were not only heterogeneous; they were also determined by context."

"Under colonialism, caste was thus made out to be far more - far more pervasive, far more totalizing; and far more uniform - than it had ever been before, at the same time that it was defined as a fundamental religious social order."

So the narrative on the "caste system" in the textbook draft has two glaring problems. It erroneously identifies the Vedic period with a rigid birth based occupational system, which is in all possibility a different phenomena of a different period. Secondly, it betrays an Orientalist obsession with caste and an assumption that caste is the essence of Indian society and possibly the only or the most important thing to be talked about when discussing India. The Vedic period had many great achievements which are completely ignored, thereby essentializing and reducing the Vedic period into 'caste'.

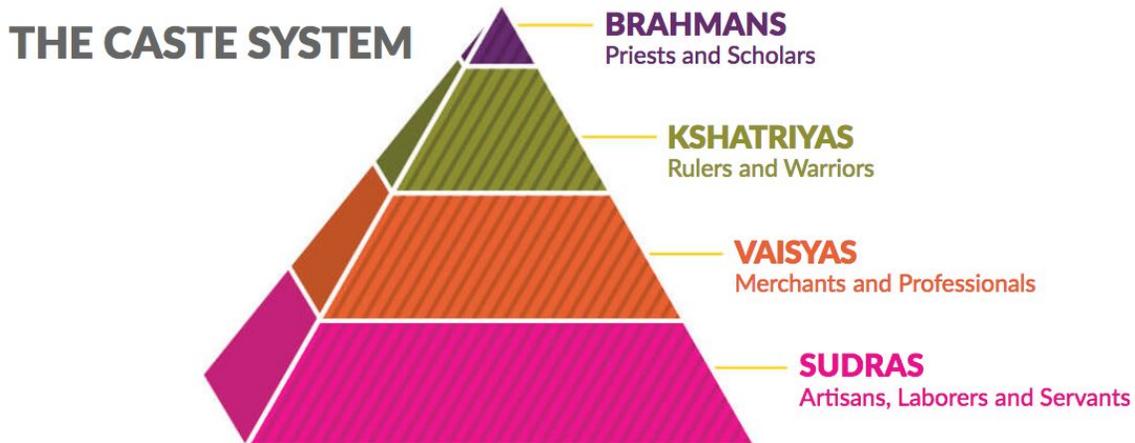
⁵ A Basu et al, 2015 Genomic reconstruction of the history of extant populations of India reveals five distinct ancestral components and a complex structure, Proceedings of National Academy of Science USA <http://www.pnas.org/content/113/6/1594.abstract>

⁶ Nicholas B. Dirks, 2001, Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India, Princeton University Press

The textbook draft also uses an outdated narrative of unidimensional caste system even portraying it as a 'caste pyramid' on page 163. The caste pyramid was removed from the HSS framework cycle in 2015 as the IQC found it an outdated and inaccurate depiction.

Page 163: The Caste system pyramid

Study the chart of the caste system that developed in ancient Indian society. Then answer the questions that follow.



23. To which caste did most ancient Indians belong? [HSS 6.5.4](#)

24. Which caste was the smallest? Why do you think this was so? [HSS 6.5.4](#)

Similar is the case with outdated colonial construct named “Brahmanism” on page 148. It was in the 18th century that European scholars inaccurately constructed this when they encountered India. The term Brahmanism was removed from the 2016 History Social Science framework after much deliberation. The textbooks while continuing to use it to describe Indian religion does not even mention that it is a European construct.

The textbook draft also does not use examples provided by the framework narrative that show that the social structure was indeed fluid and dynamic and not rigid. The framework narrative mentions the Sages Vyasa and Valmiki as examples of the most important sages within Hinduism who were not born Brahmin. These examples too are completely and conveniently ignored in a Orientalist discourse on “caste”.

4. The Myth about Ashoka's "conversion" to Buddhism after Kalinga war

On page 156 the textbook claims the following about Indian ruler Ashoka and his "conversion" to Buddhism

"His unprovoked attack on another Indian kingdom caused the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people. In the aftermath of so much violence, Asoka underwent a dramatic change. He converted to Buddhism and began to rule using Buddhist principles about peace."

The position that Ashoka converted to Buddhism after the war with the Kalinga has been shown to be a myth with absolutely no evidence to support it. Ashoka's army invaded Kalinga in 262 BC but it is evident from Ashoka's minor rock edicts that he had embraced Buddhism more than two years before the war⁷. Charles Allen writes in 'Ashoka: The Search for India's Lost Emperor' that from the minor rock edict it is evident that Ashoka embraced Buddhism in or about 265 BC⁸, which is years before the Kalinga war in 262 BC. This is a clear violation of Category 1.4 which mandates historical accuracy as well as category 1.6 which calls for primary evidences while describing such a legendary figures.

5. Omission of Jainism and important aspects of Hinduism.

Many important aspects of Indian civilization and Hinduism are completely missed or glossed over in the textbook draft. Some important ones are mentioned below

1) Jainism

The 2016 History Social Science Framework narrative also had added a paragraph on Jainism.

"In India, through the teachings of Mahavira, Jainism, a religion that embraced the dharmic idea of ahimsa, or nonviolence, paralleled the rise of Buddhism. Jainism promoted the idea of ahimsa (non-violence to all life), especially in the form of

⁷ See Sanjeev Sanyal, 2016, The Ocean of Churn, How the Indian Ocean shaped Human History, Penguin.

⁸ Charles Allen, 2012, 'Ashoka: The Search for India's Lost Emperor', Abacus

vegetarianism. It has continued to play a role in modern India, notably in Mohandas Gandhi's ideas of nonviolent disobedience."⁹

Today Jainism is practiced by more than 4.5 million people worldwide which is about one third of Jewish population in the world. Unfortunately we see Jainism not even mentioned in the textbook draft. This significant omission violates not only category 1.12 of Evaluation Criteria Map but also category 1.2. For thousands of Jain children in studying about all religions through California's public schools, it deprives them of sense of pride in their heritage in the classroom environment, thus violates category 1.10 and Standards for Evaluation of Social Contents.

2) Sanskrit and Tamil Sangam literature

Likewise, while the whole story of ancient India and Hinduism is told using 'Aryan' and 'Dravidian' as speculative racial categories, the textbook fails to mention the glorious heritage of Southern India. Southern India had the best of teachers and traditions of Hinduism, Buddhism and Jainism as well as great kingdoms such as Pandyas and Cholas. The 2016 framework narrative had added a couple of lines on Tamil Sangam literature, which is completely ignored and not even mentioned.¹⁰

Similarly, aspects of Sanskrit literature are only glossed over. The framework mentions that "Vedic teachings gradually built up a rich body of spiritual and moral teachings that form a key foundation of Hinduism as it is practiced today." and that "Students might read a few hymns from the "Bhumi Sukta" excerpted from the Vedas to discover the nature of Vedic hymns."¹¹ The textbook does not make even such a mention in its attempt to objectify and exoticize ancient India.

3) Scientific And Cultural Advances Of Indian Civilization

The seventh grade textbook completely glosses over the scientific achievements, aesthetics, and philosophy. Even the whole of Bhakti movement within Hinduism is reduced to a single line mention.

For the first time, many positive aspects of Indian civilization were added to the History Social Science Framework at the insistence of the Hindu American community. The

⁹Page 224 (chapter 10, lines 941-943), Jainism section, World History and Geography, California History Social Science framework 2016.

¹⁰ Page 219, reference to Sangam literature, World History and Geography, California History Social Science framework 2016.

¹¹ Page 220, Reference to Bhumi Sukta, World History and Geography, California History Social Science framework 2016.

textbook has completely ignored the updates and has continued with outdated narratives on India and Hinduism.

Conclusion

There are many other glaring problems in the textbooks including insensitive depiction of sacred Hindu text which betray Orientalist stereotypes. These violate the California laws as also the criteria for instructional material as mandated by CDE. Hence it is imperative that these problems be addressed, failing which the textbook not be adopted for teaching in California public schools.